

EGYPT PULSE

نبض مصر



Head of the Jewish community in Egypt Magda Haroun, who criticized the ban on the Abu Hasira festival, is seen in this undated photo. (photo by Twitter/@egyptindependent)

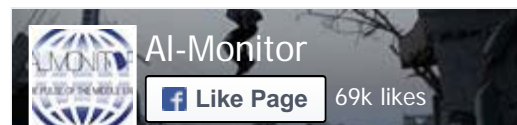


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Closing Jewish tomb in Egypt raises tensions

CAIRO — The women in Beheira governorate, west of Cairo, cheered following the announcement of the Egyptian judiciary’s ruling to cancel the **annual celebration** of the birth of the Jewish rabbi known as Abu Hasira, whose tomb is in the village of Damtu in Beheira governorate. Consequently,



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there was Israeli rage and resentment, and tensions between Cairo and Tel Aviv renewed over the rabbi's tomb, while the Israeli Foreign Ministry commented on the [Egyptian court ruling](#) and said it would consider a response and discuss it with the Egyptian authorities.

SUMMARY

PRINT

Egypt's closure of the tomb of Rabbi Abu Hasira and the cancelation of the annual festival celebrating his birth in the Nile Delta have angered Jewish pilgrims and tourists, inciting Tel Aviv to take the matter to UNESCO.

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Israeli newspapers and local channels made withering attacks on Egypt because of this court ruling, and said it was unacceptable.

According to Israel's Channel 7, Tel Aviv decided to [resort to UNESCO](#) to register the tomb of the rabbi as a monument so it would not be destroyed. It will also renew its demand to the Egyptian authorities to transfer the remains of the rabbi to Israel. The Yedioth

Ahronoth newspaper warned that [removing the tomb](#) from Egypt's historic heritage sites may cause a problem in the future, yet the newspaper did not explain what kind of problem it could possibly cause.

[Egypt's court ruling](#) to cancel the annual celebration of the birth of the Jewish rabbi stated that the festival would be "permanently canceled for violating public order and morals, and being incompatible with the dignity and purity of religious rites."

The residents of Damtu complained about the practices and rituals, unknown to Islam, carried out by [Jews](#) who come to celebrate the birth of the rabbi. Among the rituals of the celebration is a symbolic auction of the tomb's key (no one

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actually owns a key) before officials from the Ministry of State of Antiquities open the tomb. This is then followed by drinking and pouring alcohol over the tomb and licking it off. The ceremony also includes slaughtering animals, mostly sheep and pigs, followed by hysterical dancing to Jewish tunes, saying prayers and crying over the tomb while hitting one's head on the tomb's walls to receive blessings.

The Egyptian court ruling was not only limited to compelling the Egyptian government to ask the World Heritage Committee at UNESCO to [remove this shrine](#) from the Egyptian Antiquities records, but to block any Egyptian-Israeli negotiations regarding the shrine as well. It also refused Tel Aviv's request to transfer this shrine to Israel, since Islam respects all Abrahamic religions and rejects the exhumation of the dead.

Abu Hasira was known to be of Moroccan origin. He died in 1880, but he is widely popular among Jews around the world until this day, as they believe he was a blessed figure, whose real name was Yakouv bin Masood.

When he was a young man, he went on a trip to Palestine to visit the holy places, but the ship he was on sank at sea. However, he clung to a mat (hatzeira in Arabic) until he reached Syria, and then went on to Palestine. He then traveled to Morocco via Egypt, and in particular via Damtu in Damanhur, where he was buried in 1880, according to his wishes.

There are [Egyptians](#) who also think of the rabbi as a blessed person and believe he was an elder Islamic sheikh. They also say that his story had been falsified; Abu Hasira's real story is that he was a Muslim of Moroccan origin who lived in Marrakech, was named Muhammad ibn Yusuf bin Yaacoub and worked as a cobbler.

Experts on Egyptian-Israeli relations in Egypt predicted that the tension would escalate between Cairo and Tel Aviv because of the Abu Hasira issue, and Israel's tendency to



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internationalize the issue and accuse Egypt of [anti-Semitism](#).

Meanwhile, the former head of the Hebrew language department at Al-Azhar University, Mohammad Abu Ghadir, told Al-Monitor that the Moroccan community in Israel, which sanctifies this rabbi, is very active, and since there are elections in Israel in March, party leaders have been pressuring the Israeli government to convince Cairo of keeping the shrine and allowing Jews to visit. "Tel Aviv succeeded in revoking a similar ruling to close the shrine when [Hosni] Mubarak was still president," Abu Ghadir said.

On the subject of Abu Hasira being a Muslim sheikh instead of a Jewish rabbi, Abu Ghadir said, "Archaeologists and historians in Israel doubt that the rabbi's body is actually inside the shrine and they think he is a legend."

[Elham al-Zayyat](#), head of Egypt's Federation of Tourism Chambers, told Al-Monitor that the cancelation of the tourists' visits to the tomb of Abu Hasira will not be of importance, and will not result in a loss for Egyptian tourism companies. He said in an exclusive statement, "In the '80s, the number of Jews who visited [the tomb of] Abu Hasira was estimated at 10,000, the majority of whom, if not all of them, were from Israel, from the Jews of the Moroccan community. However, now only hundreds come from Israel in few annual trips."

"The current generation of Moroccan Jews in Israel is more liberal, regarding religious beliefs, than their parents and grandparents," he said, adding, "I don't know why this has been exaggerated, especially that it is not true that Israeli tourists were engaged in Magonism-like celebrations, because dancing is a normal thing in any celebration, even during the ceremonies [celebrating] the birth of sheikhs in Egypt."

Zayyat said there are two types of Israeli tourism in Egypt, in addition to the trips to visit Abu Hasira, especially in January. The first type of tourists are the Israelis who come to gamble at the Hilton Taba in [South Sinai](#), and the second type are

the Arabs living in Israel, both Muslims and Christians, who go to Taba and Sharm el-Sheikh, because of the affordable prices of these tours.

After the [shrine was closed](#) in 2001, Israel managed to have it reopen for Jewish tourists. However, that was in light of the distinct ties with Cairo, in the era of former Egyptian President Mubarak, which no longer exist today. The latest developments warn of a possible international Israeli escalation against Cairo, which might have already started by resorting to UNESCO.

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